

LGA Corporate Peer Challenge

West Lindsey District Council

Tuesday 21 to Friday 24 January 2025

Feedback report



Corporate Peer Challenge

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1. Introduction

Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) is a highly valued improvement and assurance tool that is delivered by the sector for the sector. It involves a team of senior local government councillors and officers undertaking a comprehensive review of key finance, performance and governance information and then spending three and a half days at West Lindsey District Council (West Lindsey) to provide robust, strategic, and credible challenge and support.

CPC forms a key part of the improvement and assurance framework for local government. It is underpinned by the principles of sector-led improvement put in place by councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) to support continuous improvement and assurance across the sector. These state that local authorities are: responsible for their own performance, accountable locally not nationally, and have a collective responsibility for the performance of the sector.

CPC assists councils in meeting part of their Best Value duty, with the UK Government expecting all local authorities to have a CPC at least every five years.

Peers remain at the heart of the CPC process and provide a 'practitioner perspective' and 'critical friend' challenge.

This report outlines the key findings of the peer team from its visit, and the recommendations that the council is required to action.

2. Executive summary

West Lindsey is delivering a range of projects with and for its local communities, many through its successful bidding for government funding. Much of this work is down to the council's constant: learning; improving; positive relationship building and work with its partner organisations; and its committed and enthusiastic staff.

The council's good strategic relationships with its registered housing providers for example has allowed them to co-develop their housing strategy, enabling specific accommodation for specific, diverse groups. West Lindsey also has good relationships with its Central Lincolnshire Local Plan partners, leading to good work

across the partnership area and a robust housing supply position.

West Lindsey supports, works with and celebrates the diversity of its communities and staff in various ways. Its recently adopted community consultation and engagement strategy will further strengthen this work but community representatives are unaware of the strategy. The council therefore needs to engage with as many local stakeholders as possible to inform, promote and benefit from the strategy.

Various stakeholders however still perceive the council's work as 'Gainsborough centric'. This could lead to other areas feeling left out of council support or disengaged. West Lindsey should therefore review its external communications, and use its community consultation and engagement strategy, to best promote its work throughout the district to help address this.

West Lindsey also has opportunities to strengthen and streamline its existing engagement with parish councils who want more regular strategic engagement, especially around planning issues. West Lindsey need only build on/review its current community and neighbourhood plans work with its parishes but should ask how best to engage with them to ensure all can work best together.

All the council's work, for and with its communities and partner organisations, is driven by its corporate plan. West Lindsey's administration adopted the plan in June 2023 after the previous month's local elections saw a new political administration for the first time in 15 years. Most, but not all, of the administration's top priorities feature clearly in the council's corporate and executive business (action) plans for various reasons, which is causing some issues. The council's political leadership should work with its Policy and Strategy team and other officers to address this.

West Lindsey's robust, well-communicated and data driven performance management system seems to be working well at corporate and service levels to progress the corporate plan. Not all managers apply the corporate appraisal, 1:1 staff meetings, training and development frameworks though. The council should therefore embed these frameworks and enhance communications around its training and development fund to fully support its staff.

The council's most immediate, challenging issues are its changing Management

Team, which by June 2025 may only comprise three officers - and may not have two statutory officers, and the implications of possible local government reorganisation in Lincolnshire. So West Lindsey should prioritise the completion of its management structure review, agree a new structure with the administration, and implement it. This will help build the immediate, essential resilience the council needs to maintain 'business as usual' and progress forward.

Councillor/officer relationships are generally good but there are some ongoing challenges, which are hindering some progress and impacting on some staff. The council must address this to ensure the best relationships help the council to progress its priorities. West Lindsey has the opportunity to build on good examples within the council as part of this work.

West Lindsey's councillors have a good training and development programme available to them but not all councillors know much about it and may have limited availability to take up such opportunities. The council should therefore ask its councillors how, where and when they want to learn, and respond accordingly so they make the most of this support to best carry out their roles.

Committees, boards, meetings and report requirements are increasing across the council, impacting negatively on workloads. West Lindsey needs to review at least the number and frequency of these to ensure they work as effectively as possible.

West Lindsey appears to be managing its finances well through good financial governance, and a comprehensive financial planning and monitoring approach with built-in contingencies and reserves. Its Governance and Audit Committee, internal and external auditors have not identified any significant weaknesses but the council has identified budget gaps from 2026/27, which West Lindsey needs to address with its new Savings Board and staff.

The council also has robust, programme management methodologies, especially its service review programme, which is identifying recommendations for implementation. West Lindsey could however spend less time on programme management documentation, and increase its delivery time, for smaller projects. It should also implement its service review recommendations, and complete its remaining service

reviews once it has refreshed the process, for maximum return. The council can then use the learning from all its service reviews to develop its more ongoing continuous improvement programme with its staff to make the most of their related learning. As part of this latter programme the council should agree its purpose and/or outcomes so it can plan, resource, monitor, manage and celebrate the work towards them.

3. Recommendations

There are a number of observations and suggestions within the main section of the report. The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

- 3.1 Recommendation 1 – review your management structure as a priority –** your Management Team may only comprise three officers by June 2025 and may not include two of your three statutory roles. Staff are concerned about the impacts this could have on their capacity and increased workloads. A gap in the officer structure between services managers and directors is also causing a few issues. So complete your review of, and agree, your management structure with your administration, to enable you to recruit accordingly.
- 3.2 Recommendation 2 - prioritise the filling of your new management structure – especially your Head of Paid Service and Section 151 Officer** – following on from Recommendation 1, appoint on an initial interim basis if necessary to ensure your statutory appointments start work as soon as possible. Prioritising Recommendations 1 and 2 will build your management resilience to maintain 'business as usual' and progress as a council.
- 3.3 Recommendation 3 - continue discussion with the peer team and LGA on the best way to resolve the identified councillor/officer relationships challenges**, which are hindering progress and working relationships in some areas. Peer team members supported some of your colleagues affected by this during their visit and will continue to do so. This will align with work the LGA is already instigating to assist this. Continue these discussions and work with the peer team and LGA to best resolve this and progress positively as a

council.

- 3.4 Recommendation 4 - refresh your business planning** – most, but not all, of your administration's top priorities feature clearly in your latest corporate and executive business plans. Resultingly, your Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council cannot be sure their priorities are being sufficiently delivered. They should therefore proactively work with officers in your Policy and Strategy team and other officers to fully articulate and align those top priorities throughout your corporate, service and financial planning processes. This will help ensure everyone understands what will be delivered and how.
- 3.5 Recommendation 5 - develop plans to address the gap in your medium-term financial plan** – you have identified budget gaps from 2026-29, recognise the need for a longer-term strategy and plan to address them. Your Together 24 programme has identified actions that can assist, and your Savings Board is working to identify new income generation and further efficiency savings. Continue all this and any other work possible to balance your future budgets and enhance your financial sustainability.
- 3.6 Recommendation 6 - design and implement a new continuous improvement/change programme** – your Together 24 programme has delivered positive change and savings, and intends to deliver more. You intend to use this work to develop a more ongoing continuous improvement programme. So consider and agree the purpose and/or outcomes of the latter programme at the earliest opportunity, then robustly prioritise and allocate the resources it needs. This will help you develop and deliver and benefit from this approach fully.
- 3.7 Recommendation 7 - review the number and frequency of your meetings** - the number of committees, boards, meetings and report requirements are increasing. This is negatively impacting on some officer workloads and raising questions about the value of all this work. So review the number and frequency of your meetings to ensure they are as effective as possible. You may also wish to review the purpose, objectives and other issues related to

this work to make the most of this opportunity.

- 3.8 Recommendation 8 - develop your internal communications to address issues raised throughout our findings** – you are facing notable change, including that of your Management Team, the implications of possible local government reorganisation in Lincolnshire, and the need to identify and realise savings. Staff are concerned about issues like this, impacting on their workload and wellbeing. So enhance your internal communications and engagement, to support them, keep them informed, involved and on side.

4. Summary of peer challenge approach

4.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of this peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge, and the LGA selected peers on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peer team comprised:

- Member Peer - Cllr Wendy Fredericks, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing and People Services, North Norfolk District Council (DC)
- Member Peer - Cllr Rory Love OBE, Cabinet Member for Education and Skills, Kent County Council
- Chief Executive Officer Peer - Joanne Wagstaffe, Chief Executive, Three Rivers DC
- Serving Officer Peer - Ian Boll, Corporate Director Communities, Cherwell DC
- Serving Officer Peer - Liz Barnard, Head of Service, Policy, Projects and Performance, West Suffolk DC
- Shadow Peer – Ethan Norman, Impact Graduate, West Northamptonshire Council
- LGA Peer Challenge Manager – Vicki Goddard
- LGA Programme Support Officer – Suraiya Khatun.

4.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following five themes, which form the core

components of all CPCs. These areas are critical to councils' performance and improvement. West Lindsey asked the peer team to additionally explore the points in bold within each theme:

- 1. Local priorities and outcomes** - are the council's priorities clear and informed by the local context? Is the council delivering effectively on its priorities? Is there an organisational-wide approach to continuous improvement, with frequent monitoring, reporting on and updating of performance and improvement plans? **Has the council identified the right priorities for 'Our People' and 'Our Place' within its vision for West Lindsey and other key corporate strategies? How well placed is the council to deliver these priorities now and in future? Is the council effectively engaging with its local communities? Is there collective understanding and ownership of the council's corporate plan at every level of the organisation?**
- 2. Organisational and place leadership** - does the council provide effective local leadership? Are there good relationships with partner organisations and local communities? **How well placed is the council to take advantage of opportunities within and beyond the district's boundaries, particularly the Spherical Tokamak for Energy Production fusion power plant in the Bassetlaw district? How effective is the council's decision-making in relation to planning and delivering its Local Plan? Does the council's organisational structure support delivery of its corporate plan?**
- 3. Governance and culture** - Are there clear and robust governance arrangements? Is there a culture of challenge and scrutiny? **Does the council have sound decision-making arrangements? Are councillor/officer relationships constructive and clearly defined? How effective and fit for purpose is the council's committee system, including for the implementation of a Greater Lincolnshire Devolution Deal? Is the council's councillor training and development programme effectively supporting councillors' decision-making? Is the council's Values and Behaviours**

Framework effective, fit for purpose, and well embedded in the council's culture?

4. **Financial planning and management** - Does the council have a grip on its current financial position? Does the council have a strategy and a plan to address its financial challenges? What is the relative financial resilience of the council like? **Does the council's financial planning successfully ensure long-term financial sustainability? Does its OneFinance system support good financial planning and decision-making? Are the council's strategic priorities reflected in its medium-term financial planning? Is there the right balance of risk in the council's approach to commercial investment and income generation?**
5. **Capacity for improvement** - Is the organisation able to bring about the improvements it needs, including delivering on locally identified priorities? Does the council have the capacity to improve? **Does the council's performance management drive continuous learning? Does the council have sufficient organisational resilience to deliver its strategic priorities and respond to emerging issues, challenges, risks and opportunities? How effective is the council's strategic approach to workforce development?**

As part of the five core elements outlined above, every CPC includes a strong focus on financial sustainability, performance, governance, and assurance. In addition to these themes, the council asked the peer team to provide feedback on:

6. **How can the council as a Local Planning Authority best work with housing and other building developers and partners** to show and implement greater consideration of public views?
7. **How effective has the council's Together 24 Programme been in transforming services? Does the council have the right approach and change support in place to deliver continuous improvement, and the**

continued delivery of programmes and projects post-Together 24?

4.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused; it is important to stress that this was not an inspection. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the council and its challenges. This included a position statement the council prepared in advance of the team's time onsite. This gave the peer team a clear steer on West Lindsey's local context and what the team should focus on. The documents also included a comprehensive LGA finance briefing (using public reports from the council's website) and a LGA performance report outlining benchmarking data for the council across a range of metrics. The latter was produced using the LGA's local area benchmarking tool called LG Inform.

The peer team then spent three and a half days at West Lindsey, during which they:

- gathered evidence, information, and views from more than 42 meetings, in addition to further research and reading
- spoke to more than 87 people including a range of council staff, councillors and external stakeholders.

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and councillors.

5. Feedback

5.1 Local priorities and outcomes

West Lindsey agreed and adopted its Corporate Plan 2023-2027 in June 2023. This followed the council's local elections the month before, which saw a new political administration for the first time in 15 years. The council has based its corporate and

executive business (action) plans on robust, intelligent use of local information. This includes the council's State of the District Report, corporate and service level performance management information.

Consequently, the council is delivering successful projects for its communities, including its most deprived Gainsborough neighbourhoods. The new cinema, Baltic Mill green space and market street renewal units are such examples. West Lindsey's successful use of UK Shared Prosperity and Levelling Up funding has assisted work like this. Much of this is down to West Lindsey's continual relationship building and work with its partner organisations, which many internal and external stakeholders spoke positively about. Evident commitment, enthusiasm and work of the council's staff to deliver the administration's priorities for its communities have also been key.

The council's [LG Inform CPC performance report](#) provides key data including West Lindsey's strengths, especially regarding its key priorities, compared to its Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) nearest neighbours¹:

- 0.32 households per 1000 in temporary accommodation – the third lowest in 2024/25 Quarter 1
- 3850 per 100,000 of its population have a further education qualification or above in the academic year 2023/24 – the third highest
- 3255 per 100,000 of its population have a further education qualification excluding apprenticeships in the academic year 2023/24 – the second highest.

Regarding the council's other key priorities, the LG Inform report also highlights that:

- 56.8 households per 1000 households were on the council's housing waiting list – the highest of its nearest neighbours
- 39.6 per cent of household waste was recycled, reused or composted, and there was 490.9 kilograms of household waste per household in the district in 2022/23 – the fourth lowest
- 39.2 new businesses were registered per 10,000 of the 16 plus year old population – the fifth lowest.

As a result of all this work, the council continues to improve its services to support its

residents', visitors' and businesses' latest needs.

West Lindsey is supporting, working with and celebrating its diverse communities. Commissioning housing, adopting voice activated technology, providing council materials in different languages, and running community and cultural events and activities for/involving diverse groups - from those with learning needs to different ethnic minority communities – are examples of this. The council's natural, intuitive approach is informing and developing this work well.

West Lindsey's recently adopted community consultation and engagement strategy will further strengthen work with its diverse communities. The council wants this strategy to enable its residents and other stakeholders to continually shape and support its work to enhance the district for all. The peer team heard however that community representatives are unaware of this strategy. The council therefore needs to identify and engage with as many residents, businesses and other community stakeholders as possible to inform the strategy as well as benefit from it.

Various stakeholders perceived the council's work as 'Gainsborough centric': projects visibly happening; councillors lobbying for, deciding on and promoting work; and council press releases focused on the town, rather than work throughout the wider district. The council's last CPC in January 2020 identified this same perception. This is therefore a continuing issue that could lead to other areas of the district feeling left out of council support, disengaged or discontent. West Lindsey should therefore review its external communications to better promote its work throughout the district. The council could also use its community consultation and engagement strategy to address this with its district-wide communities, especially those in rural areas.

The peer team heard that council staff understand the administration's top priorities of markets, active leisure and culture, and are progressing related work. However, most, but not all, of these priorities feature clearly in the council's latest corporate and executive business plans, which the administration has signed-off. The current corporate plan does not mention markets, and whilst the executive business plan references all three priorities, they do not stand out from others. The Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council are therefore unsure if West Lindsey is sufficiently delivering their priorities, which is causing them some unease.

The peer team also heard several times how officers present corporate, service and finance updates to the Leader and Deputy Leader for required decisions who can take time to respond. This delays officers fully progressing their priorities.

The peer team therefore recommends West Lindsey's political leadership proactively works with its senior officers to clearly articulate and agree its priorities and related key work for the corporate plan's duration. This includes strengthening the council's whole business planning process so the corporate plan, executive business plan, financial plan and the performance management framework fully and transparently reflect the administration's priorities at corporate and service level. West Lindsey's Policy and Strategy team can use its current, thorough refresh/stocktake of the council's corporate plan to assist this. Aligning everything this way will help the council most effectively utilise and clarify staff capacity and resources. A transparent approach would also enable better communication across the council, and with external stakeholders. It would additionally help speed up required decision making to best deliver the corporate plan.

5.2 Organisational and place leadership

The peer team was impressed with the passion and commitment from the council's staff in supporting and delivering for local communities. Staff came across as positive, flexible, empowered, and they take on new or additional work/roles as required. They support each other and enjoy working at the council, which is evidenced in some cases by their long service. They also felt their managers trusted and supported them. Councillors also trust and value their staff.

Good working within and across service teams is contributing further to this positive workplace atmosphere. IT and other managers attend each other's service team meetings to find out and respond to what services need to best work together.

This positive culture extends to the council's productive work and relationships with its partner organisations, especially on economic regeneration and community safety. All partner organisations the peer team spoke to said how good the council is to work with; one partner notably said that West Lindsey is "absolutely phenomenal".

The council needs this staff and partner positivity and productivity more than ever to

help address its most immediate, challenging issues – its changing Management Team, and the implications of possible local government reorganisation in Lincolnshire. Staff are understandably concerned about all this and the impact it will have on their capacity, increased workloads and potential activity gaps.

Given current uncertainty around such issues, the peer team recommends that West Lindsey enhances its communications, consultations and engagement with staff, councillors, partners, residents, businesses and visitors as appropriate. This will keep them informed, manage their concerns and expectations, and provide opportunities to work with the council as well as learn about what it is doing.

Three of West Lindsey's Management Team members are due to have left the council by June 2025, two of which are statutory officers. The council needs to address this significant capacity issue and a potential 'point of failure' as a matter of urgency to ensure statutory compliance and the continuity of its work. Any significant delays in making these appointments will result in critical gaps and place extra strain on the remaining three members of the management team.

Furthermore, there is a notable gap in the officer structure between services managers and directors, the outcomes of which include:

- process and confusion stalling decision making at Wider Management Team level, where service teams are conscious of their already stretched Management Team, and so ask this wider team for sign-off/decisions as required
- career progression challenges – the current structure and pay gap makes it difficult for/deters third tier officers to aspire to a director post
- potential staff turnover – where third tier officers see safer and more incremental career opportunities elsewhere.

The peer team therefore recommends West Lindsey urgently and thoroughly completes its review of, and agrees, the council's management structure with the administration. This will help ensure West Lindsey plans the necessary capacity, skills and organisational culture to deliver its priorities and fulfil its statutory duties. This should not stall the appointment of the Head of Paid Service and Section 151 Officer, which the peer team also recommends as a priority task, even if on an initial

interim basis. Agreeing its management structure and appointing to these critical posts will help build the immediate and essential short- and longer-term resilience the council needs to maintain 'business as usual' and progress forward.

In terms of place leadership, West Lindsey has simple, beneficial opportunities to work more with its parish councils, who want more regular strategic engagement with West Lindsey. The council need only build on/review its current community and neighbourhood plans work with its parishes, and could reinstate its previous District Matters conversation forum with them. Whatever form this engagement takes, West Lindsey should design this with its parish councils. This will help all best collaborate on areas of joint interest, for example planning (portal) matters. There could also be further opportunities, especially though any Lincolnshire local government reorganisation, for the council, parishes and any future councils to plan and deliver work together, for example through asset, finance and/or service transfers.

5.3 Governance and culture

The peer team heard throughout its visit that the council has been constantly improving. As someone summarised, "each iteration [of West Lindsey] has been better". This reflects the council's motto to "strive for the gain of all".

A key reason for this is that West Lindsey is a learning organisation. An illustration of this is its staff flexibly changing roles, undertaking training and supporting others to deliver what the council requires. West Lindsey's corporate performance management team and processes also support and empower service teams to continually identify and address any underperformance via improvement plans.

Whilst process and confusion can stall decision making at Wider Management Team level, this team otherwise feels empowered and is working well. Its open, transparent meetings allow officers to raise anything required, and the team responds as needed.

It was evident to the peer team that there are some ongoing challenges regarding certain councillor/officer relationships. This includes aspects of identified councillors' language and behaviour affecting some staff. Such challenges particularly arise when the councillors in question cannot see sufficient progress in certain work areas, even if work is progressing. The peer team also heard that the noted councillors do

not always clearly articulate the changes they want to see. When instances like this come to a head, officers involved sometimes do not know how to respond. They also fear further meetings with the councillors. This hinders progress, the councillors can then get more frustrated, and this negative cycle can continue.

The peer team heard good examples of these councillors providing robust yet constructive challenge to senior officers. Through their strategic and politically sensitive responsibilities and experience, these officers can respond positively.

The peer team heard however that some staff feel challenges sometimes over-step the line, for example as overly critical views and anger about those in question, their work, what they have or not done. Challenges like this have resulted in upset, anxiety and confusion for staff, who then become unable to work their best. Resultingly, work does not always progress as fast as it could, and some staff's health is being negatively affected. Additionally, the peer team heard how such challenges by the identified councillors may also impact on some councillor/councillor interactions.

The council needs to support its staff and the identified councillors as soon as possible to resolve this and prevent further related issues. West Lindsey can learn from its positive working relationships to help this. These include those outlined at the end of this section between the Governance and Audit Committee, internal and external audit, those within the Wider Management Team mentioned above, and the councillor and service manager focus group mentioned in section 5.5.1. This will help everyone to be as productive, effective and collaborative as possible.

Colleagues from across the council raised this with the peer team in sensitive, constructive ways and vice versa. Members of the peer team supported the councillors and some of those officers affected as part of their visit and will continue to do so. This will align with related work the LGA is already instigating just as sensitively with specific individuals. The peer team recommends West Lindsey colleagues continue their work with the peer team and LGA to resolve these issues.

In terms of councillors working more generally, the May 2023 local elections saw 19 new councillors - just over half the council's seats. West Lindsey officers invested resources to develop an extensive four-year training and development programme

for them. The programme supports new and all councillors in their latest roles.

Not all councillors attend or know about the breadth of support available, despite a re-run of the programme from September 2024. Additionally, their commitments outside their councillor roles may be affecting their availability for such training. They may therefore be missing out on opportunities to help them undertake their roles. The council should therefore ask its councillors how, where and when they want to learn. This will enable West Lindsey to best respond to their needs, so they make the most of this support to carry out their roles.

Councillors need to particularly make the most of this support because the number of committees, boards, meetings and report requirements are increasing. This is impacting on their workloads, and that of officers supporting them. Colleagues are also raising the value of this increasing work and how they could otherwise spend their time delivering West Lindsey's priorities. The peer team therefore recommends the council reviews the number and frequency of its meetings to ensure they are as effective as possible. This review could build on the joint work of West Lindsey's Governance and Audit Committee, internal and external auditors outlined at the end of this section. The council may also want to review the purpose, objectives and other issues related to this work to make the most of this opportunity.

If the council identifies that this work is of value, it should consider if it is adequately resourcing it, and identify any opportunities to improve it. This will ensure officers and councillors can undertake the required work in the time available.

West Lindsey's Governance and Audit Committee, its two independent members, and its external and internal auditors are working positively and supportively together. They welcome and explore each other's views, enabling them to say and address what is needed. The committee is reviewing and implementing the council's latest risk management strategy and fraud policy. It is also improving the frequency and how related strategy and registers are reported. The committee has identified the Management Team changes outlined above as a key risk to address.

5.4 Financial planning and management

The peer team learned before and throughout its visit how West Lindsey manages its

finances well through good financial governance, and a comprehensive financial planning and monitoring approach, with officers providing clear advice to councillors. As part of this, West Lindsey has paused additional investment to its property portfolio of six properties in light of changes to borrowing rules, and the requirement to set aside minimum revenue provision. The council's latest investment return budget for 2024/25 was £0.651 million, and was forecast to be above budget at £0.907 million due to higher than expected balances. West Lindsey also has a commercial contingency budget and valuation volatility reserve to mitigate any risk of respective rental and capital on disposal losses.

The council's Corporate Policy and Resources Committee of 14 November 2024's report on its 2024/25 budget included the draft revenue forecast outturn position for 2024/2025 as a net contribution (underspend) to reserves of £0.16 million. West Lindsey had also previously held earmarked reserves of £20.047 million at 31 March 2024 of its total usable reserves of £28.486 million to support the ongoing investment in its capital programme, development of services and management of financial risks. Its general fund working balance had been 19 per cent of net operating expenditure, compared to its strategy minimum of 10 per cent. All such work is supporting its budget well.

West Lindsey's Governance and Audit Committee, internal and external auditors did not identify any significant weaknesses in signing off its 2023/24 accounts. In the spirit of continuous improvement though, the external auditors recommended the council update its risk management strategy, which it is addressing as outlined in section 5.3. West Lindsey should also formalise documentation of contract exceptions to ensure greater transparency and compliance with procurement rules.

The council has started planning its 2025/26 budget via its high-level refresh of its medium-term financial plan. This has identified forthcoming budget gaps of: £1.1 million for 2026/27, £1.3 million for 2027/28 and £1.3 million for 2028/29. West Lindsey's reserves can bridge its short-term financial gaps but the council knows it needs a longer-term strategy and plan to address these gaps.

The council's Together 24 service review programme, outlined further in section 5.7, has identified savings West Lindsey can make. The peer team did not see much

evidence of other savings the council is making, or needs to make, beyond this programme, to address its financial gaps. The new Savings Board, a councillor working group the council established in autumn 2024, is however working collaboratively to identify areas and plans for new income generation and further efficiency savings. The peer team recommends West Lindsey continues all this and other work possible to help the council balance its future budgets and enhance its financial sustainability.

The peer team also recommends the council enhances its communications and engagement with its staff and councillors on West Lindsey's finances and savings plans and activities as they develop. This will help ensure everyone knows what they need to do and when, so they can prepare and action those plans. It will also strengthen corporate/service relationships, and further empower service teams to manage their own budgets and service plans.

5.5 Capacity for improvement

The peer team heard how West Lindsey's staff are productive, welcoming, inclusive and supportive towards colleagues from all backgrounds, especially those from private and retail sectors. All this is helping its staff to work their best.

Various council activities contributing to this healthy environment include: regular equalities updates on the intranet, national campaign days for different community groups, events, staff networks including one on equalities. Staff highlighted more opportunities the council could progress to build on this momentum and success, including a new additional mental health group/staff network.

Given its positive workforce and changing management structure, West Lindsey has an opportunity to develop, communicate and implement staff succession planning across the council. This will keep staff updated on such developments, inform them of and engage them with longer-term internal career opportunities, and manage their related expectations. All this will help retain them, so West Lindsey can make the most of their ever-growing skills and experience to deliver its priorities.

West Lindsey is also continually learning and improvement, due in part to its robust programme management methodologies, especially for its Together 24 service

review programme. Thorough reviews through this work have identified a range of recommendations for service teams to implement, which will improve their efficiency.

The peer team heard however how officers can spend unnecessary time on programme management documentation for smaller projects. Sometimes smaller plans just need more discussion or action amongst colleagues to progress them. West Lindsey's investment savings reserve already enables some smaller activities to happen. This should expand to realise immediate benefits of other work.

5.5.1 Performance

The peer team saw various evidence of West Lindsey's robust, well-communicated and data driven performance management system at corporate and service levels. This includes the council's annual review of performance measures, targets and their narrative to ensure they best link to corporate and service plans and policies. A councillor and service manager focus group robustly and constructively reviews and challenges each measure's need and target. The group also initiates supportive performance improvement plans for areas under target with service teams, who action the plans. Through this approach, the council has for example reduced its time for answering land charge questions from 42 days to the same day.

The peer team met some service managers who outlined how this process works well as they 'live and breathe' it day to day to manage their delivery against the council's priorities. In light of this whole, successful approach, other councils are approaching West Lindsey to learn from them.

Due to time constraints onsite, the peer team could not robustly ascertain how performance management works more generally and regularly throughout the council. This includes regular service/corporate monitoring by officers, reporting to and engagement with its main policy and overview and scrutiny committees. There are however mentions of related positive work throughout this report about service, financial, risk and other planning and delivery.

West Lindsey has corporate appraisal, 1:1 meetings with line managers, and training and development frameworks. The peer team heard however that not all managers consistently apply them, and appraisals do not always explicitly link to corporate plan objectives. The council is therefore not supporting and developing its staff

consistently and fairly from a performance management point of view to best deliver West Lindsey's priorities. It should therefore fully embed the frameworks, to enable this to happen.

Key to help achieving this is the council's central training and development fund. Staff bid for this funding, and Management Team review and decide which bids to support, but the process and its criteria are not transparent. Staff therefore do not know what makes a successful bid or feel less motivated to apply. Those who bid successfully can feel guilty, which can put them off applying in future.

The peer team therefore recommends the council improves its communications and transparency around this fund. This will help ensure staff understand the system, how to best apply, and enable them to suggest improvements. It will also help increase their motivation, faith in and use of the process, so that all staff have maximum opportunity to increase their skills to deliver the council's objectives.

5.6 How can the council as a Local Planning Authority best work with housing and other building developers and partners to show and implement greater consideration of public views?

West Lindsey has good strategic relationships with its registered housing providers, as evidenced by their exclusively positive comments about the council. This has allowed them to successfully co-develop their housing strategy. Through this strategy, housing associations have delivered needs-led accommodation specific to their communities, from planning to completion on various projects. This includes for example bespoke housing for older people and those with learning difficulties.

West Lindsey also has great relationships with its Central Lincolnshire Local Plan partner authorities, who also spoke positively about the council to the peer team.

The council could however strengthen and streamline its existing engagement with parish councils, as outlined in section 5.2. This includes it notifying parish councils of relevant planning changes, such as those related to Section 106 Agreements (those between local authorities and developers in respect of planning permissions). The local planning portal generated recent difficulties in viewing planning applications when the system was updated without parish council colleagues' knowledge. Parish

councils can care about issues like planning passionately because of the immediate local impact they issues can have. Enhanced joint work of this nature will therefore strengthen relations and work between West Lindsey and its parish councils.

West Lindsey should also explore strengthening a self-service process for residents so they can raise valid planning enforcement enquiries during development. This could save council officers travelling the district to answer such enquiries, enabling them to undertake other beneficial work instead, and improve contact with residents.

5.7 How effective has the council's Together 24 Programme been in transforming services? Does the council have the right approach and change support in place to deliver continuous improvement, and the continued delivery of programmes and projects post-Together 24?

The peer team heard how the council's service review programme Together 24 has successfully delivered change within some areas, including its contact centre and customer services, to become more efficient and effective. As outlined in section 5.4, the programme has identified savings the council can make by carrying out related recommendations from each review.

In delivering reviews, West Lindsey has not had capacity to carry out all the recommendations or the remaining service reviews. The peer team strongly suggests however the council finds ways to implement the backlog of recommendations while they are still relevant to ensure maximum returns. Those returns will then free up other resources to implement further recommendations and reviews.

West Lindsey is refreshing its service review process, learning from its completed reviews, to implement the remaining ones in as streamlined a way and quickly as possible. The council should continue this productive, developing approach to ensure all remaining reviews identify, action and benefit from emerging recommendations.

Once it has completed all its service reviews, West Lindsey wants to develop this work into a more continuous improvement programme. The peer team suggests the council considers and agrees the purpose and/or outcomes of the latter programme at the earliest opportunity. These could for example be financial or time savings, or service improvements – and once its goals are clear, it can plan, monitor and

manage and the work towards them. West Lindsey will need to robustly prioritise and allocate resources for this programme to realise the maximum benefits.

As Together 24 developed, more staff engaged with, helped and owned it. So the council should keep working with its staff to make the most of this momentum and shape the work's next stages. Service teams will then benefit from the best future continuous improvement programme, which they will have helped shape and own.

In summarising the above points, the peer team recommends the council designs and implements a new continuous improvement/change programme to seamlessly replace its refined service review programme once that work is complete.

6. Next steps

The LGA recognises that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings. The LGA will continue to provide on-going support to the council. **Following the council's and LGA's publication of the final CPC report, West Lindsey needs to produce and publish an action plan within five months of the time onsite** to address the peer team's key recommendations outlined above. As part of the CPC, the council is also required to have a progress review and publish the findings from this within 12 months of the CPC. The LGA will also publish the progress review report on its website.

The progress review will provide space for a council's senior leadership to report to peers on the progress made against each of the CPC's recommendations, discuss early impact or learning and receive feedback on the implementation of the CPC action plan. The progress review will usually be delivered on-site over one day. The date for the progress review at West Lindsey is to be confirmed.

Meanwhile, Mark Edgell, Principal Adviser for the East Midlands, Yorkshire and The Humber, and the North East, is the main contact between West Lindsey and the LGA. Mark is available to discuss any further support the council requires via mark.edgell@local.gov.uk.

ⁱ CIPFA maintains a model that generates sets of statistical nearest neighbours. The default model uses 20 factors including demographic variables, deprivation, employment and population density.